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Dieter Reinisch

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Cumann na mBan and the acceptance of women in the Provisional IRA: An Oral History study of Irish republican women in the early 1970s

Dieter Reinisch

PhD Candidate, Department of History
University of Vienna

In autumn 1968 the General Army Convention of the IRA carried a motion to allow the membership of women. This decision was reconfirmed, following the republican split in 1969, by the Provisional Army Council. The move was heavily criticised by members of the republican women's organisation Cumann na mBan themselves. Based on 25 interviews conducted with former female activists of the Provisional Republican Movement between 2009 and 2011 the reasons why Cumann na mBan opposed the decision are examined from the perspective of the female activists themselves. The findings show that those women who vigorously opposed the move came from a traditional republican background and held conservative social and religious views. Whereas those women who were in favour of joining the IRA were young and new recruits who joined the Republican Movement following the outbreak of armed conflict in August 1969. The results of the study contradict the existing picture of Cumann na mBan as an organisation subordinated under a male IRA. Instead it depicts an independent women's organisation actively involved in the Republican Movement.

Introduction

While individual women such as Constance Markievicz or Máire Drumm play a prominent part in republican historiography, female activists were not allowed to join the ranks of the IRA until the late 1960s. Women were organised in Cumann na mBan, founded in April 1914. The name is Gaelic and means

“Organisation/Group/Council of Women”. It played an active role in the 1916 Easter Rising and the following War of Independence, although women of Cumann na mBan were not allowed to be involved in direct fighting. Its central role was first aid and logistical support for the Irish Volunteers. While membership reached 11,000 in the early 1920s, the organisation suffered some serious splits following the debate on whether or not to support the Anglo-Irish Treaty and later due to the support of some of their members for De Valera’s Fianna Fail party. By 1950 the organisation hardly existed and was made up of a handful of more or less inactive republican veterans.

In autumn 1968 the General Army Convention of the IRA decided to accept women as members of the organisation. In the course of the coming year infighting over the question of the future programmatic and military strategy of the Republican Movement led to a split into a Marxist faction calling itself the “Official IRA” and a nationalist one which became known as the “Provisional IRA”. Following these events the decision to accept women in the IRA was reconfirmed at a meeting of the Provisional Army Council following the republican split in 1969/70. Women were first recruited by the Provisional IRA in Belfast, which led to fierce criticism by activists of the women’s organisation Cumann na mBan itself.

In the following contribution I will outline the reasons that convinced the IRA to accept women within their ranks and why republican women themselves disagreed with the decision. The research is based on interviews with former members of Cumann na mBan. While interviews were also conducted with male and female members of the Provisional IRA, I will concentrate on the opinions given by members of Cumann na mBan themselves.

The historiography of the Republican Movement after 1969 either conceals the role of women in the Northern Irish conflict or – insofar as it is influenced by feminist theories – it emphasises the role of women as a sole auxiliary force for a male paramilitary organisation. Women would dominate the public sphere; the political one is dominated by men. These two spheres are clearly separated by historians (Cullen 2000, p.64).

Not just in literature but also in the public consciousness, especially outside of the nationalist community in the 6 Counties, Cumann na mBan is often overlooked. In the opinion of Cullen (2000, p.66), a phenomenon does not exist for readers as long as it is not written down by historians. Yet not just historians ignore the existence of Cumann na mBan after the 1940s, even sociological research focuses solely on women in the Provisional IRA, Sinn Féin or feminist organisations. Academic research on Cumann na mBan, both historically and sociologically, give readers a picture of the organisation as an insignificant footnote to events in Northern Ireland since 1969.

The following study seeks to counter this picture. In particular the findings provide an insight into gender roles in the Republican Movement at the beginning of the armed conflict in the 6 northern Counties. It will also help to illuminate debates within national liberation movement as to whether women should be allowed in the military wings.

Literature review

The historiography of Cumann na mBan after the end of the Civil War in 1923 is hardly developed. While there are some publications on the early stages of the organisation there is almost nothing dealing with the period following collapse in the early 1930s. Though the state of research has developed in recent years

there is still no major in-depth study on the republican women's organisation during the Northern Irish troubles.

The literature used in this study can be grouped into five categories. These are firstly general overviews of the history of the Northern Ireland conflict. All these publications hardly even mention Cumann na mBan. Secondly, there are studies on the first two decades after the foundation of Cumann na mBan (Conlon 1969; Matthews 2010, 2012; McCarthy 2007; Ward 1983, 1995). The third category includes studies on republican female activists in the second half of the 20th century (Aretxaga 1997; Corcoran 2004, 2006; Jaenicke 1976; Keenan-Thomson 2011; McAuliffe/Hale 2010; Power 2010; Ryan/Ward 2004; Talbot 2004; Ward 2004). The fourth section includes studies dealing with the situation of women during the Northern Irish Troubles (Brady et al. 2011; Calamati 2002; Cullen Owens 2005; Fairweather et al. 1984; Higgins/Diggs 2000; Hill 2003; Pickering 2002). Finally there are studies comparing female activism in Northern Ireland with female activists in other national liberation and anti-colonial movements such as India and Sri Lanka (Alison 2007, 2009; Banerjee 2012).

While the period of the formation of Cumann na mBan until the end of the Civil War in 1923 is sufficiently examined there are only two major publications which cover the history of the organisation until the early 1940s (Ward 1983, Matthews 2012). Researchers dealing with the period after 1969 focus mainly on republican women in Sinn Féin and the IRA (Fairweather et al 1984; Aretxaga 1997; Talbot 2004; Keenan-Thomson 2010; Power 2010).

Thus this study is the first original account of the republican women's organization after 1968.

Methodological approach

This study employs the methods of oral history. Annie, a woman who joined Cumann na gCailíní, the youth wing of Cumann na mBan in the late 1950s, explained that, when the Northern organisation took over the Cumann na mBan leadership in the early 1970s and all internal documents and minutes were handed over, they were immediately burned for security reasons; therefore the only possible research method is by conducting interviews with activists of the republican women's organisation. Oral History is an approach within historical sciences in which interviews with "contemporary witnesses" are used as historical sources. (Wierling 2003, p.81) Sociologists and social historians make frequent use of Oral History in the fields of researching biographies (Breckner 1994, Schütze 1983) and the so-called "reconstructive analyses of cases" (Rosenthal 1995). Bornat (2007, p.44) writes:

"It works best when approached in multidisciplinary mode. The richness of the data, in terms of the possibilities for levels and contexts of interpretation, suggests a need for access to the methods and theories of more than one discipline and a balanced approach ensures that no one emphasis predominates".

The main influences in the German tradition of Oral History were sociologists such as Schuetze (1983) or Rosenthal (1995, 2007). Bornat (2007, p.44) states that within this social science context, Oral History opens up "possibilities for work across discipline boundaries [and] enriching interpretation through links between past and present".

This study on Cumann na mBan is an in-depth case study with intensive interviews collected from participants in the military and political organisation. To collect the data, 25 qualitative expert interviews were conducted with female members of the Provisional Republican Movement. Potential interview partners had to have been members of Cumann na mBan and/or Cumann na gCailíní at

any time between 1968 and 1986. This was the period when Cumann na mBan was part of the Provisional Republican Movement.

By using a snowball sampling process nearly 20 interviews were conducted in 2009 and 2010. Further interviews were recorded in the following years and so the number was extended to 25 interviews. Interviewees were promised anonymity.

Interviews were semi-structured with narrative sequences (Bogner et al. 2002, Glaeser and Laudel 2009, Kuesters 2009). The structure of the interviews was based on material from private and public archives such as the Sighle Humphries Papers in UCD or the Linen Hall Library in Belfast. To win the confidence of the interviewee one cannot enter the field by asking directly if the activist was involved in military activity. Thus narrative sequences are essential both to offer archival material for interpretation and to give the activist the chance to speak more openly of her involvement (Rosenthal 2005). In analysing the interviews I was more concerned with what activists think, feel and remember than with what actually happened, facts and dates.

The interviewees

It is important to consider the regional spread of the women, their social and family background and their motives to join the Republican Movement. 8 women were from the southern 26 Counties and 17 from the 6 Counties in the Northeast. 13 women joined the Republican Movement before the split in 1969, 9 after the split and the date of joining is unknown in three cases. Of the women who joined Cumann na mBan or its youth wing pre-1969, 25% came from the South and 75% from the North. Post-1969, the numbers were 40% to 60%. All women who joined Cumann na mBan before 1969 came from a Republican family and their parents were active in the Republican Movement, some of their

mothers were even in Cumann na mBan. Contrary to the situation post-1969, less than 50% came from a Republican background. All women said they were “Catholic” though most of them did not practice their belief. No woman had any higher education before joining the Republican Movement.

Historical Background

At the height of the debates which led to the split in 1969 the male Army Council lost control over Cumann na mBan. At a commemoration in Bodinstown in 1968, the women’s organisation had refused to march if communist flags were carried. The following year Cumann na mBan did not participate in the commemoration. Instead they issued a statement explaining the situation and saying “Cumann na mBan will continue to uphold the ideals and traditions of true Republicans as it has done since its foundation” (Leaflet 1969). The IRA started to train women in Dublin and Cork to weaken the women’s organisation. This was followed by a decision at the General Army Convention in the autumn of 1968; the necessary changes in the Constitution to allow women membership of the IRA was affected by a motion that was carried having succeeded the two-thirds majority (Former IRA member, Roscommon).

When the republican split in 1969 occurred, Cumann na mBan aligned itself to the newly formed Provisional Army Council. Nevertheless the Provisional Army Council confirmed the decision to allow women full membership of the IRA at a meeting held on the last Saturday in September 1970 (Former IRA member, Limerick). Cumann na mBan was not involved in these debates. Thus this decision was met with fierce opposition from activists of Cumann na mBan. At the annual convention held on December 3rd, 1972, the women’s organisation carried a motion from the Craobh (local branch) in Belfast saying: “22. That the position concerning ‘Army Girls’ be clarified” (Resolutions 1972).

The search for equality within the Provisional Republican Movement

Initially, only a few women were included in the Provisional IRA. However, from 1971 onwards the influx of women into the IRA appeared to be a problem for Cumann na mBan. Annie from Limerick said:

“We were not happy about it, especially not in the North. There were tensions, particularly during periods of internment, and many women in Cumann na mBan resented the women in the IRA for this move. And the army women believed they were now a little better than the members of Cumann na mBan, particularly in Belfast it was so”.

Geraldine from Dublin agreed:

“In the early ‘70s, some women went [into the IRA]. That was never an order, never agreed by Cumann na mBan. Cumann na mBan worked side by side with the army [but] under the Cumann na mBan O/C”.

Cumann na mBan was afraid of losing their role in the Republican Movement if women gained influence in the IRA. Furthermore some women claim there used to be a difference in the activities of women in the IRA and activists of Cumann na mBan. Annie explains:

“They (the IRA women, note D.R.) could not work as open as we did. I believe in the 6 Counties we were doing more or less the same as the volunteers did. Your role here [in the 26 Counties] was less military, you know, money, arsenals and such”.

If one listens to the stories of the women from both sides, the tensions between the Provisional IRA and Cumann na mBan are visible. However, few women want to admit that this “friction” (Niamh) had any influence on the work of either one of the organisations. Even Róisín, a woman from Belfast who usually spoke very disparagingly of the women in the IRA emphasised at the end of her remarks: “There were no differences. We have all fought for the same cause. We were very active”.

However, the representations of the two groups show significant differences. As mentioned earlier, the members of Cumann na mBan saw their organisation as independent with strong, confident women who made their voice audible in a male-dominated movement. They say it was a steadfast republican organisation which upheld republican principles and that they are the continuity of the struggle since the foundation of the Republican Movement. There was furthermore a protective function for female activists in the movement.

However Cumann na mBan was viewed by the women in the Provisional IRA as a weak organisation that pursued a conservative ideology, played only a minor role in supporting the IRA and thus the activists were not directly involved in the war. It had also been criticised by women of the IRA on the basis that their comrades in Cumann na mBan would not fight for equal rights for women in the Republican Movement, let alone in Irish society.

On the other hand it was the activists of Cumann na mBan such as Mary who said the women in the IRA did not follow political motives in their decision-making:

“At that time, I think they were glamorised becoming Army Girls. They thought it was going to be a glamorous situation. They didn’t think it through”.

Women’s republican ideals

Even the derogatory term “Army Girls” shows that the activists of Cumann na mBan did not have a high opinion of their female comrades in the IRA, neither politically nor militarily. Caoimhe agreed with Mary, both were active from the mid-1960s onwards in Ardoyne, North Belfast:

“I know it might be wrong saying it but [in] the first crowd if Army Girls there were lots of promiscuity that would have

never happened in Cumann na mBan. (...) I don't like to judge people but they didn't have very high morals. I think the Provisional Movement was afraid because Cumann na mBan was so highly principled. I think there was a fear that they couldn't get control of Cumann na mBan. You know, they couldn't do what they wanted".

Geraldine was similarly dismissively of the women in the IRA:

"Now, there were women who favoured to be with the men. Well, some of them had actually their boyfriends there, so they wanted to be there and joined the army instead of Cumann na mBan. That's why the army had some women".

However, there was no difference in the work of Cumann na mBan and the IRA according to her. Nevertheless she stresses women had fewer rights in the IRA:

"No, no, absolutely no differences except that they took their orders from the men and they never went higher than [ordinary] volunteers because the men would never take orders from the women. But in Cumann na mBan you could rise up, move on, if you were suitable for a position higher up".

Another criticism was the use of women to lure British soldiers at night time into ambushes, as stated by Mary:

"That was even around the time ex-British soldiers were coming into the army. The suggestion came from them about using girls. I was approached if I knew any girls. Well, they didn't say what they wanted but you knew what they meant, to lead somebody into a trap. (...) And how you get them into a trap? (...) So I mean there were things like that coming – I came out shortly after that. I resigned because I couldn't take that sort of behaviour. You know, I wouldn't be able and I would have felt guilty for selling any girl for that sort of behaviour. It was probably the high moral attitude. I wouldn't want anybody to be used like that".

Kate added:

“It was like: ‘We can use these women in any way we like.’ (...) Sorry to say that, many men didn’t have very high morals of women then, you know what I mean, right: ‘We can use this girl to do this thing.’ They (the IRA, note D.R.) didn’t think of the consequences, where this could lead girls. Girls were brought up in strict catholic families. (...) It would not just be against Cumann na mBan but against our own catholic morals to go out and use our bodies to trap a British soldier or an RUC man because as much you hate them you drew the line to that”.

While the activists of the women’s organisation argue the IRA brought their volunteers into dangerous situations they stress their own organisation had given them protection when they were on active service. Róisín from West Belfast said:

“If ASU (Active Service Units, note D.R.) were erected and the army needed volunteers they asked women in Cumann na mBan to support them. If a woman was in an ASU she was not allowed to speak to anyone about their activities. Only if there were problems, for example in operations if there is only one way in but none out and the member was afraid of being shot dead, then they could report to Cumann na mBan and we then discussed it with the army”.

A majority of the activists of Cumann na mBan, both from the 6 Counties and the 26 Counties, stress the “safety issue” (Niamh). Margaret says that Cumann na mBan demanded in every operation that the member report back to her local commander in order that the organisation knew its member had returned safely. Neala stated “consciously or unconsciously, the army was dominated by men”. Therefore all the equality enjoyed by women in the Republican Movement had been given to the activists by Cumann na mBan:

“Cumann na mBan would have had a concentration in Belfast. They were fearless; they did whatever was needed to be done. They were not afraid if they were given orders by the men, they were not afraid of questioning if they felt they were wrong. That’s where you had the backing of the

executive of Cumann na mBan. If they felt something was wrong – and instinctively we would have known there is something not right. And we would never say: ‘I am doing it because XY said so, that’s it.’ We walked back and said: ‘Listen, I have a problem here with an issue and I need to bring it to somebody.’ So that’s where the protection came in, you had that kind of protection”.

Kate therefore emphasised the relationship between Cumann na mBan and the IRA:

“Cumann na mBan was an independent organisation. We worked with the IRA but the IRA had no control over us which was a very good thing because Cumann na mBan could have been used and abused by the IRA in that stage. The girls in Cumann na mBan felt safe because they knew Cumann na mBan would always regard them, no matter what was happening. So it was a very strong movement and a very loyal movement with all the volunteers in it. Every girl that was in Cumann na mBan would have not hesitated doing anything with the IRA, you know, they wouldn’t have to be asked twice, but in the same time we still had our own independence”.

Furthermore it was not just independence and protection women in Cumann na mBan felt but also a portion of confidence that was given to them through membership of the organisation. Kate describes this as following:

“If you were a volunteer of Cumann na mBan and you were sitting with a crowd of men you were never ever insulted, you were never ever put into a position that you felt under pressure or embarrassed. You knew that you get a portion of respect”.

Influence of feminism: changing constructions of womanhood

However many women in Cumann na mBan did not assess the situation that positively. According to Deirdre and Louise, both from Lower Falls in Belfast, there was no free, independent women's organisation that was trying to protect

their activists in a male-dominated world: “We were annexed to the IRA.” (Louise) and: “We were subordinated to the IRA.” (Deirdre) These claims are confirmed by the works of Bowyer Bell (2000, p.129f) and Moloney (2007, p.55) who both believe that “Cumann na mBan was subservient to the seven-man Army Council”.

Margaret joined Cumann na gCailíní when she was a teenager in Lower Falls and reports their situation both in Cumann na mBan and the IRA:

“I was in two organisations. I was quartermaster in the army and continued to be in Cumann na mBan. This led to tensions within Cumann na mBan. I was sent to Dublin and I was accused of not asking for permission. I did not know that I would have to do that. I just did my work. (...) We have all fought for the same cause”.

Her narrative shows – contrary to the claims of most activists of Cumann na mBan – that it was indeed possible for female volunteers of the IRA to achieve higher ranks. Other women who were active in the IRA give a similar picture which is very often the opposite of the one presented by members of Cumann na mBan. Thus, the security issue which is portrayed as enormously important for most activists of Cumann na mBan is seen as something negative and restricting by women of the IRA such as Margaret:

“You had more freedom in the army. You didn’t have to report back after each operation. Then there were no regular meetings. Cumann na mBan had regular meetings, sometimes weekly, and there was only spoken and discussed”.

Power (2010, p.154) said that “many women came to feminism through republicanism”. This could be observed in the interviews. While some women developed feminist criticism of Cumann na mBan, none of the interviewees said they joined the Republican Movement as a result of feminist motivations. Therefore I agree with Power (2010) and Talbot (2004) in saying that women

became republican activists because they wanted a united Ireland and not because of feminist ideals. Yet Power states:

“The effect of second-wave feminism meant that women were no longer willing to accept a subordinate role within the movement. Thus, instead of joining Cumann na mBan (the women’s wing of the IRA), they expected operational equality with their male counterparts and as such insisted on joining the IRA”.

Conservative constructions of womanhood

The statement by Margaret in the previous section confirms the testimony of the women of Cumann na mBan that those republicans who joined the IRA were less interested in politics. Nevertheless the women who were in the IRA did not want to downplay the military role of Cumann na mBan, as Margaret explains:

“They were the backbone of the IRA; a strong organisation, well run and very, very strict, with very strict morals. You had to have proper behaviour and respect yourself”.

This moral rigour was also an attraction to some of the women, according to Margaret:

“You had to behave yourself morally. I remember a girl was dismissed because she was pregnant out of wedlock. It was very strict, but it was the best time of my life”.

Quoirin (2011, p.152) quotes a former member of Cumann na mBan:

“You know, only a few years later I realised how hypocritical the behaviour of Cumann na mBan was since you are in an organisation that fights not only against the British occupiers but also for a united socialist Ireland. And then you will be disciplined as a convent schoolgirl and not even that is accepted what the people in the ghetto view themselves as self-evident, namely single mothers.

Despite that one can see that women who joined Cumann na mBan before 1969 remained in the organisation. It was rather the younger recruits from the 1970s

who joined the IRA as Margaret stated “*very few left Cumann na mBan for the army, most women directly joined the army*”.

In fact, the role of women in the Republican Movement changed during the 1970s. By the beginning of the conflict in the 6 Counties there was a quantitative boost in the membership of Cumann na mBan. Finally a large proportion of the male nationalist activists were interned. The women had to take their places and proved to be able to fill the male roles in the family, at workplace, in politics and in the paramilitary organisations. Women were directly faced with their secondary role in the Republican Movement and the society. Only at this stage did subjective factors supervene. Women had to suppress their sex and become more like men to be equally recognised in the Republican Movement. This changed with the protests in Armagh Women's Prison from the late 1970s onwards, as McAuliffe and Hale (2010) argue. The republican prisoners shed their gender costume and used their body as a weapon in the struggle against repression. McAuliffe and Hale state that:

“The Armagh women spilled their blood onto their own battlefield, creating a new space for women in the political grounds of war, but this space was not accepted in the narrative of the struggle. Born with a biological sex but forced to perform their gender, these women had, to some extent, broken out of the constraints of the dominant hegemonic and hierarchical view of women as a socially constructed category”.

Conclusions

The findings show that those women who vigorously opposed the decision to join the IRA came from a traditional republican background and held conservative social and religious views. Whereas those women who were in favour of the decision were young and new recruits who joined the Republican Movement following the outbreak of the armed conflict in August 1969.

Nevertheless there were also disagreements between members of Cumann na mBan how to react to the new situation depending on the date the members joined, from which area they came and where they were active.

The frictions between the IRA and Cumann na mBan on this particular issue were strongest in the early 1970s but continued, in particular within activists in Belfast, until the late 1970s when members of the Northern Command of the IRA decided to abandon Cumann na mBan and instead include all women into the IRA.

Just as with the foundation of Inghínidhe na hÉireann in the early twentieth century, the formation of Cumann na mBan, and the changing role of women in the Republican Movement from the late 1960s, the admission of women as full members of the Provisional IRA was only a “partial victory” (Ward 1983, p.3). These partial victories could only be completed when the activists in Armagh Women's Prison broke out of the socially constructed categories. However, this outbreak is attributable to neither the prisoners of Cumann na mBan, nor those of the Provisional IRA alone. In prison, all women worked under the joint republican structure and the position of OC (Officer-in-Command) was held alternately by members of both Cumann na mBan and the Provisional IRA.

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